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Cover: A refugee family from Myanmar in neighboring Bangladesh.
PHOTO: UNHCR / H.J. DAVIES

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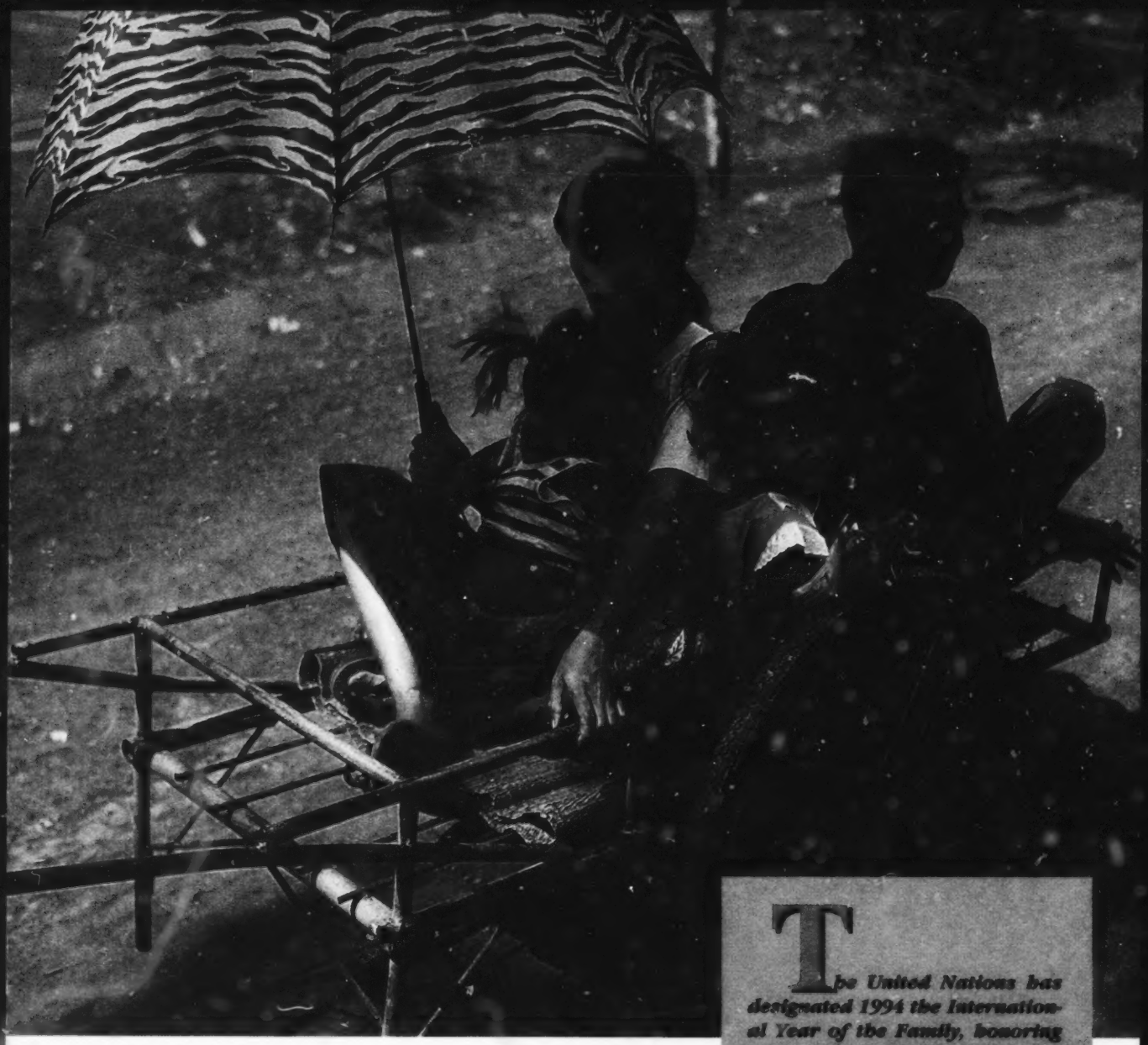


Lao refugee family at Ban Napho camp, Thailand.

Year of the Family

The United Nations has designated 1994 the International Year of the Family, honoring what a U.N. General Assembly Resolution calls "the foundation of human society and the source of human life."

But for millions of refugee families around the world, those foundations have been severely shaken, sometimes irreparably. The refugee family, exposed and subjected to trauma, violence, separation and loss of home, belongings and even identity, is without doubt the most vulnerable of families.

(continued on page 4) ▶

▶ The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) strives to provide protection and assistance to more than 20 million refugees and displaced people around the globe. Millions of these people have experienced the loss of family members through death or separation. But even those who were fortunate enough to escape with their families intact must face almost overwhelming odds in their new countries or regions of asylum. They are expected to sustain themselves in foreign and sometimes hostile environments. Often, everything that was familiar to them is lost – home, livelihood, school, friends, cultural traditions, language. Despite the pain and depression caused by this loss, they must carry on the struggle to survive. And it is usually their sense of family unity that gives them the strength and the will to do it.

After more than 40 years of work with refugees, UNHCR is all too aware that the family, the basic unit of society, is also the greatest casualty of social upheaval. Guided by both humanitarian and practical considerations, UNHCR makes every effort to preserve and ensure family unity among refugees. Because for millions of refugees, the family is all that is left.

Marie Lobo, UNHCR's senior social services officer in Geneva, says families undergo severe stress in a refugee environment. Usually, the stress is from multiple causes, any one of which is enough to create major upheaval. Women, for example, often must assume the dual roles of breadwinner and homemaker because men are left behind to fight or are killed or taken prisoner in their homeland. In addition to losing everything, these women must assume added responsibilities to keep their families together.

"It is not surprising that the mortality rates in the early stages of a refugee emergency are very high," Lobo said. "Family members are lost, some die and many are separated. People lose their means of livelihood and all their resources. There is a general loss of direction, of purpose and of meaning in life, especially in separated families. Many refugees suffer disabilities in flight and need medical attention they cannot get. The elderly are abandoned and those who cannot cope fall by the wayside. Many people die because they simply give up hope. They feel they have nothing left to live for."

Perhaps the most tragic victims are the children who become separated from their parents. Experts estimate there could be more than

A Sahrawi refugee mother and her child in Algeria. Often, refugees must be taught how to prepare unfamiliar food donated by far-off countries.

UNHCR / B. Gindr

40,000 such "unaccompanied minors" as a result of the war in former Yugoslavia alone. Several international organizations, including UNHCR, the International Committee of the Red Cross, numerous non-governmental organizations and the International Organization for Migration, are doing what they can to reunite these children with their families.

Women with small children without male support are often expected to fend for themselves. For women from traditional, conservative backgrounds, this can be especially difficult. Often, these women are taken advantage of and are sometimes victims of physical and sexual abuse. Women under these conditions find it almost impossible to defend themselves and seldom tell anyone of their plight.

UNHCR and its partners are working hard to identify these and other vulnerable cases and to provide programs for their protection.

Refugee families who would normally have cared for their old, disabled and weak members are often no longer able to do so and are sometimes forced to abandon them or lose their own lives. The guilt and sense of shame resulting from this terrible choice haunt many refugees for the rest of their lives.

To deal with these kinds of problems, UNHCR is striving to place community workers in emergency areas as early as possible to help identify those most in need – often the elderly, unaccompanied children, the disabled, and single-parent families. Foster homes are found for unaccompanied minors, if possible with families who are known to them. Sometimes, elderly refugees without support are also placed with families who can help care for them.

UNHCR has made the family the basic planning unit for provision of assistance, shelter and other needs to refugees throughout the world, using a figure of four to five persons per family. But helping refugee families should not end with provision of these basic needs. Refugee children, who sometimes spend their most formative years in refugee camps, must be given a stable environment to grow up in. Their educational, recreational, cultural and medical needs must be met. And their parents, usually their mothers, must be given help in coping with the needs of their children in such areas as health education and nutrition. Often, the food provided to refugees is not part of their normal diet, but what foreign donors have made available. Thus, refugee families must be taught how to prepare and cook what they are given.

Lobo stressed that all of these programs to help families are based on the participation of the refugees themselves. "These are their programs," she said. "We don't work in isolation."

The principle of family unity is set forth in both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which state: "The family is the natural and fundamental unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the state."

In addition, the Geneva Convention calls on governments and parties to conflicts to "facilitate in every possible way the reunion of families dispersed as a result of armed conflict."

Over the decades, UNHCR, ICRC, IOM and other organizations have helped protect and reunite tens of thousands of families around the world. But much more needs to be done. Lobo said the International Year of the Family provides UNHCR with an opportunity to stress to governments the need to reunite refugee families now separated by international boundaries.

UNHCR, particularly the Division of International Protection, is working toward a greater advocacy role with governments to bring rapid unification of separated refugee families. It is also promoting the adoption of liberal criteria in national legislation determining the admission of refugees' family members, and flexibility in regard to requirements for documenting proof of marriage or affiliation of children. Many refugees flee their homes with nothing but the clothes on their backs, and getting documentation can be a major problem.

"In the end, what we want to do is create an awareness of the special problems of refugee families," Lobo said. "This is something that is of vital interest to all of us." ■

> Families undergo severe stress in a refugee environment. Usually, the stress is from multiple causes, any one of which is enough to create major upheaval.

This emblem, symbolic of the International Year of the Family, was designed by Swiss-born artist Catherine Littasy-Rollier.

The heart, sheltered by a roof and linked to another heart, symbolizes life and love in a home where one finds warmth, caring, security, togetherness, tolerance and acceptance.

The open design is meant to indicate continuity with a hint of uncertainty.

The brush stroke completes an abstract symbol representing the complexity of the family.

UNHCR / L. DE TOLEDO

A family resettlement interview in Athens, Greece.

Reunification

Putting the family first

When conflicts and massive abuses of human rights erupt in a blaze of drama and publicity, governments and the general public in asylum countries usually respond positively to the first wave of refugees driven from their homes. But once that pristine humanitarian moment has passed and the spotlight has moved elsewhere, the host country may feel it has satisfactorily accomplished its duty. The initial welcome can cool surprisingly quickly – particularly when a newly arrived refugee declares: "I belong to a family. They need me and I need them. Please help me bring them here to safety."

International laws and agreements such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights call on states to protect the unity of existing families. Unfortunately for refugees, who are often forcibly separated from those they love, the restoration of the fam-

ily unit destroyed by outside forces does not have the same degree of formal international support.

Even the 1951 Convention relating to the status of refugees and its 1967 Protocol fall prey to this "family-blindness." In the international code of rights the Convention establishes for refugees, it does not address the right of the refugee to family reunification – though it does address such issues as employment and education. Whether or not a refugee family can be reunited is therefore determined by national asylum and admission criteria or immigration policies, which may or may not allow inclusion of UNHCR's recommendations and guidelines.

Though the 1951 Convention does not include the principle of family unity, preservation and reunion of refugee families have been promoted and carried out by UNHCR since its inception. The conference which adopted the 1951 Convention, and successive conclusions of UNHCR's Executive Committee (which indicate support by member states of particular protection policies and practices), have endorsed basic standards for family reunification which UNHCR has since put into practice. The basic recommendation of these texts is that states should facilitate the reunion of refugee families by giving the spouse and minor children the same status as the head of family granted asylum.

UNHCR guidelines augment this basic recommendation with others concerning different types of family reunification and different separation situations. The position of UNHCR is that the principle of family unity warrants, for instance, the reunion of polygamous families, and of dependent, unmarried children whatever their age. It also supports the reunion of dependents such as elderly parents; and sets out conditions under which the reunion of other relatives, such as members of the extended family, may be considered.

African countries have traditionally operated an open-door policy for refugee families. There, thousands – if not tens or hundreds of thousands – of people tend to seek refuge at the same time; all are treated as refugees.

"If the family was not able to keep together during their escape, then the first to arrive will often be followed by the others caught in successive movements of mass exodus," said George Okoth-Obbo, UNHCR senior legal adviser for Africa. The tracing of missing family members who may be in other camps, in other parts of the country or in different countries, is often the only real obstacle – though not necessarily an insubstantial one – to family reunification in this and many other parts of the developing world.

However, in some developed countries where large segments of the population see economic migrants and refugees alike as a threat, governments feel under increasing pressure to limit all forms of immigration. This has unfortunately become the case in several traditionally generous resettlement countries, particularly in Europe. A Seminar on Family Reunification for Refugees in Europe was hosted by the Danish Refugee Council in Copenhagen in May 1993. Several participants, while welcoming moves to harmonize practices among European countries, expressed alarm that these might take as their basis the lowest common denominator and impose Europe-wide draconian restrictions on family reunification.

African countries have traditionally operated an open-door policy for refugee families.

In many countries with individual screening for asylum-seekers, family reunification is unlikely to get under way until the asylum applicant has been granted refugee status or temporary protection. And status determination may take years. Reunification is sometimes made conditional on the refugee achieving financial self-sufficiency or securing adequate accommodation for his family: more time may pass while these conditions are being fulfilled. The sheer time it takes for the two procedures to be completed can render subsequent family reunion impossible, for example when family members die or children pass the age limit in the meantime.

Refugees will be caused a great deal of additional misery if, for whatever reason, the trend is toward more inflexible family reunification policies in the traditional resettlement countries. Consider these cases, for example:

• A 65-year old grandmother who ▶

Operation ReUNite

The images Paula Angelo saw on a television news program in December 1992 were far too painful to ignore. The war in the former Yugoslavia was driving elderly men, women and children from their homes. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Sadako Ogata was making a passionate appeal for help for the war victims.

"I was struck by the way the refugees, who were enduring the nightmare of being separated and cut off from their families, looked like any of us," said Angelo, who was then pregnant with her first child.

An employee of Electronic Data Services (EDS) in Troy, Michigan, Angelo knew her computer company could help separated families. One of her tasks was to find ways of using image processing technology.

Angelo enlisted the support of her Document Processing Services manager, Ken Dodd, who contacted UNHCR. Together with UNHCR, a program was formulated to convert photographs and information into digitalized messages in optical disks and to distribute them in refugee sites. A computerized data documentation and registration service was subsequently put together with the leading French computer company, Bull. The EDS/Bull project, worth $800,000, was then donated to UNHCR.

Called Operation ReUNite and coordinated by UNHCR, the project covers unaccompanied minors in the former Yugoslavia and in asylum countries where they have fled.

These children are registered by voluntary agencies and the forms they fill out are fed into a CD ROM optical disk that is made available to UNHCR's partners and concerned agencies and updated regularly.

A parent looking for a child can go to the offices of these agencies and, using any compatible MS-DOS desktop or notebook computer, call up the digitalized photographs and information about missing children.

For example, if a child can only give a nickname, the system can scan the photographs of all children with the same nickname.

The first optical disk was ready in late March, featuring 500 children. A disk is capable of storing over 40,000 files - the current estimate of children lost in the Balkan war.

Financing for Operation ReUNite comes from the Soros Foundation, set up by international philanthropist and financier George Soros, to help victims of the war in the former Yugoslavia.

UNHCR has made arrangements with organizations that deal with the problem of missing children, principally with Unaccompanied Children in Exile (UCE), headquartered in Zagreb. UCE is funded by a grant from the U.S. Agency for International Development channeled through the International Rescue Committee.

UCE is establishing correspondents in countries where children from the former Yugoslavia have been identified. Concise registration forms and pictures prepared by UCE and other agencies are handed over to UNHCR, which in turn sends them to the EDS/Bull computer center in Paris for processing into the optical disks.

The service is expected to generate additional support once the British Broadcasting Corporation implements plans for a weekly feature on Operation ReUNite in its Serbo-Croatian program.

Fernando Del Mundo

▶ *(from page 7)* looked after her grandchildren in the absence of their refugee parents, and who remains alone after their departure, may not qualify for early reunification with her children and grandchildren.

- A 16-year old boy who tries to join his refugee brother who brought him up is returned to the safe third country where he was in transit, and where he knows no one.
- A man whose three children died during the family's flight from war is told that his remaining five children, just as sick and destitute, will have to wait the outcome of his status

determination in two years time. Only then can family reunification be envisaged.

Refugees seeking reunification with the rest of their family already suffer from not being able to see each other, from not knowing when they will be together again, and from fearing that the answer might be "never." Their relief at having reached safety may be so overshadowed by distress, guilt and worry about those who remain behind that the chances of their settling down and becoming fully integrated in their host country may be seriously reduced. Negotiating with the authorities and ensuring the upkeep of those back home can absorb large amounts of time, money and emotional energy. It also keeps refugees' minds riveted to the past and to trauma, instead of allowing them and their families to start thinking of the future and rebuilding their lives.

Family reunification is often the most practical, as well as the most humane, solution for the refugee, for the rest of the family, and for the society which they join. "I would like governments to know that reunited families are the key to a durable ▶

▶ solution for the individual refugee," states Claire Hamlisch, head of UNHCR's Resettlement Section. "A reunited family is in a better position to consider its options, including voluntary repatriation, than a family that is dispersed."

UNHCR approaches family reunification on two levels. The first, an advocacy role, is based on the premise that the diversity of family situations precludes any attempt to come up with rigid, all-embracing criteria. Thus, at the national level, UNHCR encourages countries to:

- Adopt more liberal practices, including greater flexibility in deciding which family members can be considered dependents;
- Show more flexibility in requiring documentary evidence of family ties when the country of origin has limited birth or marriage registration practices;
- Reduce the time it takes to process applications;
- Impose fewer conditions such as financial guarantees and health insurance.

"Fraudulent claims have to be detected. This is necessary to protect the institution of family reunification itself," said Hamlisch. "But valid claims should never have to go unheard and remain unattended to." Hamlisch would like to see closer cooperation between governments, other agencies involved in family reunification cases, and UNHCR. "Let's share information," she said. "Information-sharing would enable us to give credit where credit is due, to those countries that have a humanitarian approach to family reunion."

The second line of approach is direct, practical assistance to refugees seeking reunion with their families. In fact, family reunion is the final stage of what is often a very long process. Before reunification can be envisaged, it may be necessary to trace the missing members of the refugee's family. Refugees often flee under chaotic, violent and traumatic circumstances, leaving all or part of their families behind. Children get lost; people stay behind to look after elderly parents or sick relatives; others may have been thrown into prison, have gone into hiding, or be lying in a mass grave. Or they may simply be in a different refugee camp a few kilometers away.

Not knowing what has happened to a loved one can be one of the hardest things to bear. The Central Tracing Agency of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) often gets letters from people thanking it for telling them of the death of a relative – information that at least puts an end to their excruciating uncertainty.

Once a refugee's missing family members have been located, often with ICRC's help, authorization has to be obtained from his or her country of asylum before the family can be reunited. This can take months. Only when such authorization has been given, can the practicalities of travel be organized. The country of origin may have to authorize the departure of those concerned. This may take more months. Identity and travel documents, including visas, may have to be arranged. If the family cannot afford the cost of travel, then financing has to be found. Assistance may be needed on arrival to help the family integrate into a strange new culture, if the whole venture is not to be invalidated at the very end by difficulties in adapting to life in the asylum country.

Once a refugee's missing family members have been located, often with ICRC's help, authorization has to be obtained from his or her country of asylum before the family can be reunited. This can take months.

Assistance in completing all these procedures is provided by UNHCR branch offices throughout the world, often working in collaboration with other humanitarian organizations as well as governments. For instance, the reunification of a family, part of which is trapped in an area where fighting is taking place, might need the help of the ICRC to trace the family members and bring them out of the conflict zone; UNHCR to obtain their acceptance by the country of asylum; and the International Organization for Migration to organize the trip.

More fortunate refugees do not need all this assistance in order to meet up with their relatives. Instead, they sometimes succeed in locating the rest of their family rapidly and directly through the extended family network or through contacts with local authorities. Their families join them in safety for a while, and – in the happiest of scenarios – eventually return home one day.

In less fortunate cases, either the tracing or the asylum country's acceptance procedures may take such a long time that some of the children may no longer be minors and will therefore have become ineligible for resettlement; parents may have died; or husbands or wives, believing their spouse to be dead, may have remarried. Time works against the separated family, unraveling once close-knit bonds and adding new wounds to existing scars that may never heal without the support of loved ones.

Kanyhama Dixon-Fyle

Mixed Families

Neither here nor there

Refugees Jadranka and Salih Bubric have lost everything but hope – a brave, defiant hope that is best illustrated by the bouncing, 4-month-old baby boy they decided to call Colin.

"Colin is not a Muslim name, it's not a Serb name, it's not a Croatian name. It's a European name," Mr. Bubric said in the cramped, 4-meter caravan that he, his wife and little Colin share in a converted holiday camp that now houses hundreds of refugees south of the Croatian port of Split.

"I'd never considered myself a Serb or a Croat or a Muslim until this crazy war started," said Mr. Bubric, a man of Muslim ancestry who married his ethnic Croat wife 15 years ago. "I consider myself a European, and that's Colin, too. He's a European. We gave him a proper European name in these difficult times."

UNHCR / A. Hollmann

Salih and Jadranka Bubric with their baby son, Colin, at a refugee camp near the Croatian port of Split. The Bubrics say Colin is an expression of hope for a better future.

Ethnically mixed families like the Bubrics were once common all over former Yugoslavia. Nobody paid much attention to the spelling of one's name – often the only way to tell a person's ethnicity – until the past two years when extreme nationalists began their ugly campaign of "ethnic cleansing." Today, hundreds of thousands of people have been driven from their homes, in many cases simply because their names are spelled differently than their neighbor's.

The tragic division of Bosnia-Herzegovina along ethnic lines has been especially traumatic for mixed families like the Bubrics who no longer know where they really belong.

"We're not welcome now on the Muslim side, we're not welcome on the Croat side and we're not welcome on the Serb side," Mr. Bubric said. "And here in Croatia, it is also very difficult. I'm worried. I don't know where we belong."

Several countries outside former Yugoslavia have indicated to the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees that they will extend temporary protection to persons unable to remain in their homeland because their spouses are of a different ethnic origin or religion. But getting to those third countries in the first place is a major hurdle. And a mixed marriage does not in and of itself make a displaced or refugee couple in former Yugoslavia eligible for resettlement.

Mr. and Mrs. Bubric and their 14-year-old daughter fled their hometown of Jajce in October 1992 following a wave of vicious "ethnic cleansing" by Serb extremists all across northern Bosnia-Herzegovina. Mr. Bubric, who spent nearly 20 years working in Germany, owned a restaurant in the Jajce area and had a substantial bank account in Belgrade. Now he and his wife have nothing but each other and their two children.

So why would a couple who have lost everything and who have no idea where they will be tomorrow decide to have a baby after 15 years of marriage? "Having this baby was a conscious decision – we wanted a baby," Mrs. Bubric said. "We made Colin on purpose. It's our way of saying that we have hope in the future. Life goes on."

"If I didn't have this hope, I might ▶

▶ as well finish myself off," Mr. Bubric added.

The Bubrics both grew up in Jajce, went to school there, met there and married there. Life was good and everyone got along. "No one ever brought up the fact that she was a Croat and I was a Muslim," said Mr. Bubric. "It didn't matter at all. We all lived together — Serb, Muslim and Croat. But then outside extremists from the countryside came and everything changed."

Neighbor turned against neighbor and today Jajce is a Serb town, its former Muslim and Croat residents either dead or scattered throughout Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia.

But for mixed families, even the flight to refuge does not bring peace. The Bubrics, for example, fled at night across the front lines and spent seven long days getting to the Bosnian-Croat town of Tomislavgrad, only to be denied shelter when authorities noted that Mr. Bubric had a Muslim name. At the time, Bosnian Muslims and Croats were supposed to be allies against the Serbs.

"I have never been a practicing Muslim — I've never been a practicing anything," Mr. Bubric said. "I was never brought up in the religious spirit. I was brought up to be a human being, and I despise those who have suddenly become nationalistic Serbs, Croats and Muslims because of this war."

The Bubrics now fear that they will never be able to return to their beloved Jajce. At the same time, they feel they cannot stay in Croatia, where there is growing anti-Muslim sentiment.

"Even if we end up going to a third country, we want to eventually go back to Jajce," Mr. Bubric said. "It will always be home."

In Zenica, Bosnia, a Muslim father looks at the only photo he has left of his daughter, who was kept in the Serb-controlled Banja Luka region by his Serb in-laws.

UNHCR / A. Hollmann

Despite the strains, the Bubric's mixed marriage has remained strong. But that is not the case for thousands of other families who have been unable to withstand the hatred and prejudice of their former neighbors. Husbands have left their wives, children have been taken from their parents.

Edem S. was forced from his home in the Bosnian-Serb stronghold of Banja Luka in May of 1992 after being jailed and harassed for weeks. Today, he lives in the dark, damp May 1 Theater in the Bosnian Government-controlled town of Zenica. Old film posters of Hollywood stars plaster the dirty windows in the front of the building, but the seats have been ripped from the theater and hundreds of displaced people now jam the smoke-filled cinema, including its entrance and balcony. Four families even live on the darkened stage. There is only one bathroom for 238 displaced people.

Edem, 35, is a Muslim whose Serb wife died 12 years ago, leaving him to raise their daughter, now aged 16. Edem's father-in-law, however, became a strong Serb nationalist in late 1991 and slowly turned against his son-in-law. In the spring of 1992, when Edem was harassed, beaten and jailed by Serb radicals in Banja Luka, his Serbian father- and mother-in-law did nothing to rescue him, took his daughter into their home and refused to let her see him again.

"I was in a small prison in the Banja Luka area and was forced to prepare all the papers giving up everything we owned," Edem recalled. "I also prepared papers for my daughter, who I thought was going to be expelled with me. But one night before we were to be expelled, they destroyed the papers of my daughter. They told me I couldn't have her because she was a Serb. They told me I had to go. I never even got to say goodbye to her."

Edem has sent several messages to his daughter through the International Committee of the Red Cross, but each time his in-laws refused to accept them, saying the girl was not there.

"I know she's there. I will never give up trying to get my daughter," said Edem, who carries a photo of the girl in his passport. "They cannot turn her against me. I gave her a gold necklace and heart with my name engraved on it and I know she will always wear it."

> "They told me I couldn't have my daughter because she was a Serb."

Across the city, Slobodan and Vesna Jovicic and their two sons, Dario and Vladimir, live with hundreds of other displaced people in a former Zenica high school gymnasium. Mr. Jovicic, 41, is a Serb, and Mrs. Jovicic, 38, is a Croat. They are now effectively trapped in Moslem-controlled territory and they are worried.

"Most of the people here have been kind to us, but we sense a change in the air," Mr. Jovicic said. "Sometimes now people call us names. More and more, I fear that when we mention our name, someone who has become filled with hate by the war will hear us and try to harm us. We feel fear."

The Jovicics fled their hometown of Jajce after enduring six months of fighting, most of which they spent in the cellar of their home. "We escaped 82 kilometers through the forest at night, not knowing where we were going," Mr. Jovicic said. "Now we're here, but we don't know really where we are or where we belong."

The couple's oldest son, 11-year-old Dario, is a tall, pale boy who suffers from heart problems. "We are worried about him," Mrs. Jovicic said. "He doesn't talk much anymore and he is very distant from the other children. He has seen too much."

Mr. Jovicic is afraid to take his Croat wife to Serbia, and also worries about his future should they try to go to Croatia. Moreover, he fears that if they stay much longer in Zenica, authorities will force him into the Bosnian Government army. He has already been called up, but is on sick leave. "My worry is that they'll make me take up a gun and either shoot her people or my people," Mr. Jovicic said. "As a Serb, I'm afraid how I'll be treated in the Bosnian army. There are very few Serbs in the army."

Despite the hardships, the Jovicics say they do not regret their mixed marriage and will never separate. "I have had several chances to go to Croatia with my family, but I didn't want to leave him," Mrs. Jovicic said, nodding toward her husband. "He also had several chances to leave me, but he didn't want to. We know a lot of couples where the husband went one way and the wife went the other. We will never do that."

"We just want to go away from here," Mr. Jovicic added. "But it seems like the whole world is against mixed marriages."

Ron Redmond

Alone in the world

Nicole is seven years old. She is alone, terribly alone, in the midst of the hustle and bustle of the Burange refugee camp in Rwanda. Some refugees are busy pitching their tents, others come and go fetching water or food. But Nicole stands motionless, speechless. She doesn't even cry.

Nicole is blind. She was struck in the head with a machete and lost her eyesight. The last thing she saw was her father and mother being butchered by madmen in Burundi.

Kind neighbors took Nicole along with them as they fled and helped her to cross the river between Burundi and Rwanda. But in the darkness of night she then lost them, too.

Nicole's case is not unique.

Half of the more than 20 million refugees and displaced people in the world who are of concern to UNHCR are children. Nobody knows exactly how many are without their parents or a close relative, because most of them are spontaneously taken in by generous families in the camps. Thousands of children have been separated from their families by war. It is estimated that unaccompanied children account for 2 to 5 percent of the refugee population in camps.

"For a child, it is a terrifying experience in itself to have to flee to an unknown land, having been abruptly wrenched away, under bombing or gunfire, from home, school, friends, everything that was comforting, that gave meaning to life, and confidence in the future," said Anne Skatvedt, UNHCR's senior coordinator for refugee children. "If the child also loses his or her parents – the only remaining reassuring link – and is left alone, it is absolutely atrocious."

These children have not only experienced events that will scar them for life – many have witnessed savage murders and other atrocities – but they also must overcome the trauma of separation.

These children have not only experienced events that will scar them for life – many have witnessed savage murders and other atrocities – but they also must overcome the trauma of separation.

"These children are the most vulnerable of all. They are totally destitute. They require, more than anyone else, protection and physical and also psychological help," said Nemia Temporal, of UNHCR social services.

Naturally, UNHCR's priority is to locate these children's parents. But that can be a lengthy and difficult task that may take years, especially when the children come from areas still at war. In the interim, UNHCR's objective is to re-introduce these children to a family structure in the refugee camps. Indeed, experience shows that a family environment can provide not only the physical needs of a child but also soothe some of the psychological distress of separation. In a family circle, particularly if it comes from the same background, culture and region, a child will most rapidly regain his or her balance.

"We have a program, we have a structure, we have a policy, but we do not have adequate resources," Skatvedt said. "There is still an enormous amount to be done. Family tracing and reunificatiion is time consuming and labor intensive."

At the Burange camp in Rwanda, there are hundreds of children like Nicole, the little blind girl. Children who roam aimlessly in the camp, or hide in the corner of a tent waiting for someone to help, to bring them food or care. The nurse stops from time to time to visit Nicole. But what more can be done? There are so many people and so few doctors and nurses to care for them.

More social and community workers are needed in the field to cater for the physical as well as psychological needs of these children, to prevent abuses and to ensure that the foster families are aware of what they are committing themselves to.

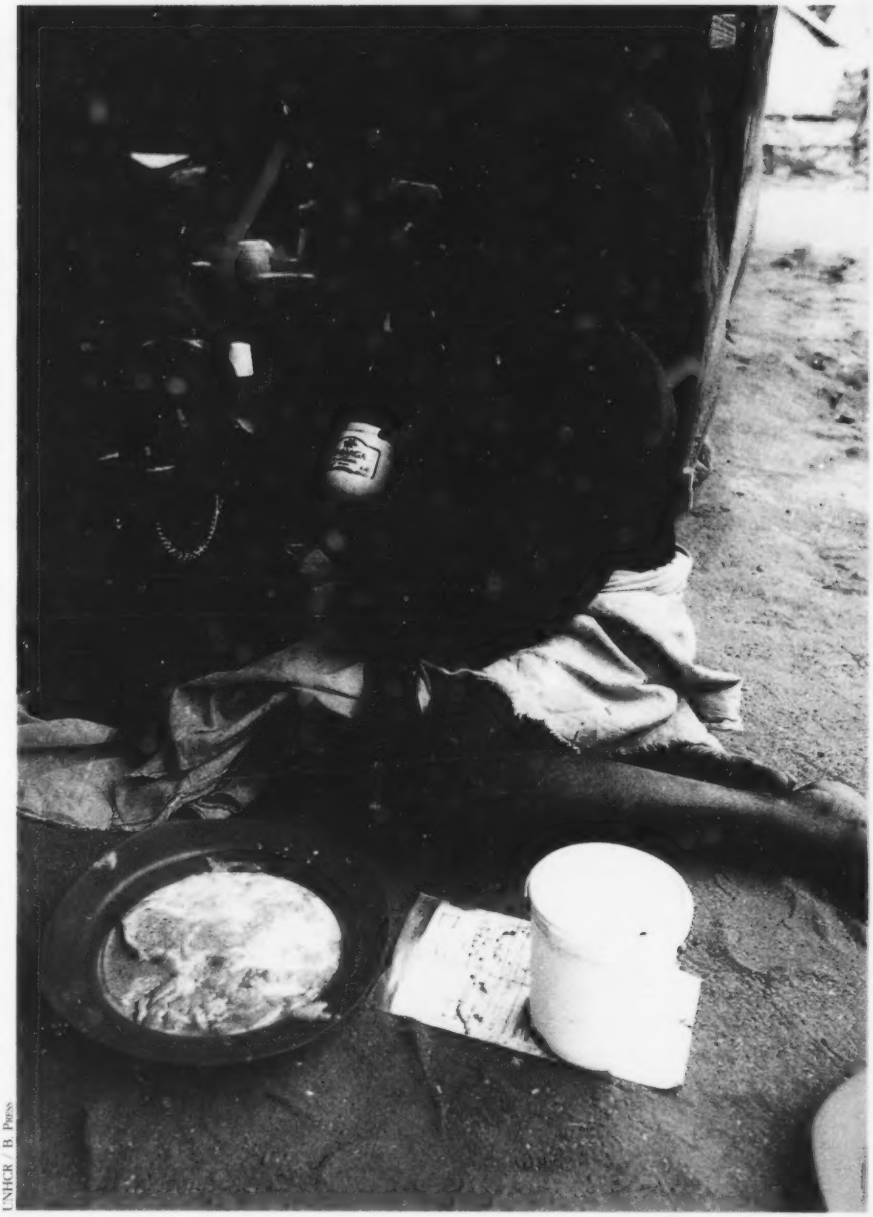
The search for lost families should begin from the very first moments of a refugee crisis, at registration. But in the initial stages of such a crisis, UNHCR's resources usually only cover the refugees' most urgent needs – food, water, medical care and shelter – and registration of foster children may not get done until later. "Refugee families who have taken in a foster child would usual-

ly not hesitate to report it upon arrival in a camp," Skatvedt said. "But after the child has lived with them for some months and has become a member of the family, they may not bother to report it."

Because it is the best solution, UNHCR relies heavily on the kindness and ability of refugee families to take in unaccompanied children. In most cases, it works well. "You cannot necessarily conclude though, that the care is appropriate," cautioned Marie Lobo, UNHCR's senior social services officer. "It is a fact, as certain studies have revealed, that some of these children are not given as much attention or the same care as other members of the foster family."

In other cases, when the foster families are repatriated, they leave behind the unaccompanied child they had been looking after while in exile. "It's one thing to offer a child shelter under one's tent in a refugee camp and to see that he gets his food ration," Lobo said. "But it is quite a different thing to take on a financial obligation to care for a child, especially when returning to a poor, war-torn country, with nothing to go back to. We would like to be in a position to help these families make that commitment."

Most often, children are separated from their families during flight. Battles are not announced in advance. They break out anywhere at any time, taking everyone by surprise. "The first riots broke out in Burundi last October in broad daylight," recalled Filippo Grandi, who led one of the UNHCR emergency relief teams sent to the area at the beginning of the biggest outflow of refugees since the Kurdish exodus in the wake of the Gulf War. "The children who were at school at the time fled in one direction, the mothers left home in another, and the fathers from work in a third. Entire villages in Burundi were thus deserted by their inhabitants in a matter of hours, with people escaping in every direction; towards Rwanda, Tanzania and Zaire." The result: more than 20 percent of the 60,000 Burundi refugees in Tanzania are unaccompanied children.



UNHCR / B. Press

Sudanese refugee children at the Lokichokio transit center in Kenya. The search for lost family members should begin from the very first moment of a refugee crisis.

Sometimes, it only takes a moment's carelessness for a child to become separated from his family. But it can take years before they are reunited.

It is difficult to forget the image of the 6-year-old boy who, in front of television cameras, fell off the back of a truck carrying him from Srebrenica to Tuzla in Bosnia-Herze- ▶

▶govina in February 1993. The boy was left alone and sobbing as he saw the convoy continuing down the road without him. Fortunately, a military officer from the opposing side picked up the little boy and put him back on the truck with his parents.

But other children in that situation were not as lucky. Weeks went by before some families were reunited, even though they were evacuated to a town in the same country only 80 km away from their home.

Children are sometimes separated from their families because they are kidnapped by soldiers.

In Kenya, Kakuma camp provides shelter for some 11,000 Sudanese boys, some as young as four. Many were abducted from their families at a very early age by Sudanese rebel forces looking for replacements and for cannon fodder to send through mine fields. The boys are among the worst cases ever seen by UNHCR. Many of them suffer from deep depression, refusing to play, to go to school or even to get out of bed in the morning. They spend their days doing nothing. A UNHCR specialist working with the boys says the terror they have experienced is deeply engraved in their subconscious and has resurfaced now that they are safe. Over a period of five years, the boys marched thousands of kilometers across Sudan, Ethiopia and Kenya. They have witnessed the worst atrocities, and have seen their friends die of starvation. Some drowned during their long exodus, and some were eaten by lions.

Art is used as part of their therapy. First, the boys are asked to draw an animal or other ordinary objects. Gradually, they draw more personal things – their village, their family, what they have been through. Through art, they express the helplessness and horror they cannot put into words as an adult would.

Other unaccompanied minors include children who are purposely sent abroad while their parents stay behind. These would include the Vietnamese boat children who turned up in Hong Kong, the Philippines, Indonesia and elsewhere in South East Asia in the 1980s. About 960 of these children remain in camps in the region. Those who do not qualify for refugee status will sooner or later have to go home. Their return will not be easy – for them or their parents. Some of the children feel they have failed their parents, who

UNHCR / P. Hinzo.

These girls were "adopted" by Vietnamese parents and then abandoned. They reached Thailand by boat, and were eventually returned to Viet Nam.

wanted them to make a new life in another country. Many of the children have spent years in closed camps, where some have been abused. The children have changed a great deal since they last saw their parents. A delicate period of readjustment will have to take place.

"It is a difficult dilemma," UNHCR's Skatvedt said of the boat children and other children sent away alone by their parents. "The parents' despair must have been great for them to send their children out to brave the pirate-infested waters of the South China Sea. And it's not hard to understand a Bosnian mother who would like to evacuate her child, because she is convinced she will see him again. It's either that or you keep him behind, where he risks being killed by a sniper's bullet."

But UNHCR knows it is in the child's best interest to remain with his or her family because once separated, it can be extremely difficult to bring them back together.

"I will never forget a little 8-year-old boy who clung to his father's trouser leg in a Zagreb gymnasium where thousands of refugees were staying," Skatvedt said. "He wouldn't let go of his father for anything in the world. His father was all he had left on earth. His mother and sister had been killed. To tear this child away from his father would have destroyed him for life."

Children who are evacuated alone often prove to be among the most difficult cases. They have witnessed too much horror, and being alone in a totally alien land is a shock many of them cannot handle. Experience has shown that children who have stayed with their parents, even in the middle of a conflict, may be better off in the long term, than children who have been evacuated alone to a foreign country. When children do need to be evacuated, as in medical evacuations from the Bosnian capital of Sarajevo, for example, UNHCR insists that one of the parents go along as well.

However great the psychological and physical support may be, whatever the number of schools, sports centers and other facilities provided for unaccompanied children to reduce their distress, nothing can replace what they really need – a goodnight kiss from those who love them most.

Christiane Berthiaume

my family

A caring family can mean everything to a refugee child, for it is often all he or she has left in the world. The following excerpts are from essays written by refugee children in Ghana especially for the International Year of the Family.

"I, EMILE DELANO COOPER, am dedicating this essay to the loving memory of all the innocent boys and girls who have died or continue to suffer in one form or the other as a result of the senseless Liberian civil war, which seems to be endless.

"By African standards, my family is not a very large one. It is composed of six persons. My father, my mother, a brother, two sisters and myself. I am the third child in the family.

"Presently we are refugees in Ghana. REFUGEE, a word I never dreamed I would ever be called by! This proves that no one knows what the future has in store...

"Since the war began, we have had many hard times. We have gone from sleeping in a decent home with warm beds and drinking cold water from the ice-box, to sleeping on the ground in the open air with mosquitoes feasting on our blood and drinking unsafe water which causes us to get ill often.

"Living as refugees is a painful pleasure. Painful because we have to work very hard sometimes and we depend on food rations from the United Nations and contributions from relatives and friends to keep us alive. A pleasure because we have learned the dignity of working with our hands. I could never have imagined myself working in a garden as a means of getting additional food. Now I am proudly doing it."

EMILE DELANO COOPER,
14, Liberian refugee in Ghana.

"MY FAMILY; IT'S FATHER, mother, the children and ... grandfather and grandmother, who live with us, too. They are old, both of them. Their faces are wrinkled, their hair is white and they lost almost all their teeth. But they are still in good shape. My grandmother is skinny, but she has remained beautiful, with her keen eye and her smile which illuminates her face. She is always ready to defend her grandchildren..."

KAYI DA SILVEIRA,
15, Togolese refugee in Ghana

"My dear friends,
the only family
and help I have now
is UNHCR...
The rest of my family
was killed
by rebel forces."

"I AM THE SEVENTH CHILD for my parents and I am the only child who lives away from them. I used to live in the capital city of Liberia with one of my older sisters to attend school.

"In 1990, when the war started, my sister said she was going to our parents' so she left me with one of her friends, Felicia Toe. But when this friend went to Ghana, she brought me along with her.

"I have written so many letters to my family. I don't think they get these letters because there is no reply. In 1994, I will try to find my family because I am missing them too bad.

"Sometimes I cry for my parents, when I see some girls or boys walking with their parents. I can feel that I don't have anybody in this world. I sometimes miss my mother when I am ill or hungry. I miss my father when I am ill or when I need someone to tell me stories. And I miss my sister and brother when I need someone to make fun."

BEATRICE L. KOLLIE,
17, Liberian refugee in Ghana

"My family comprises my father, mother, two sisters, my little brother and my grandmother. My mother was very dedicated, and one thing I admired was that she cared for every human – she was everybody's mother. She never encouraged her children to do wrong.

"My mother was 22 when she married my daddy in 1957... My father cared for each and every one of his children.

"During the heat of the war, the little food we had was taken away from us by some hard-hearted rebels. We were compelled to go up to the interior to farm.

"On our way to Klay we fell into a rebel ambush. A bullet caught my oldest sister and she fell and died. The little one was caught and raped and died.

"My dear friends, the only family and help I have now is UNHCR... The rest of my family was killed by rebel forces.

"I was not pleased to leave my country, coming out to a foreign land (Ghana) where I don't have anyone to take care of me... I cry nearly every night. I worry all day and all night about this kind of ridiculous life."

Julius Seitua,
17, Liberian refugee in Ghana

"My large family never had much money. We cultivated a small garden. We ate once a day, except our younger brother who ate twice.

"On Saturdays, boys went to the fields or helped around the house. Girls helped their mothers to cook or to draw water. In our family, when we get up, we greet each other and then we greet our parents.

Our united family is now scattered like bird feathers. We arrived in Ghana with our little money. Today we are refugees. As refugees are given food, we eat twice. Our family is so poor that we do not even have shoes to wear.

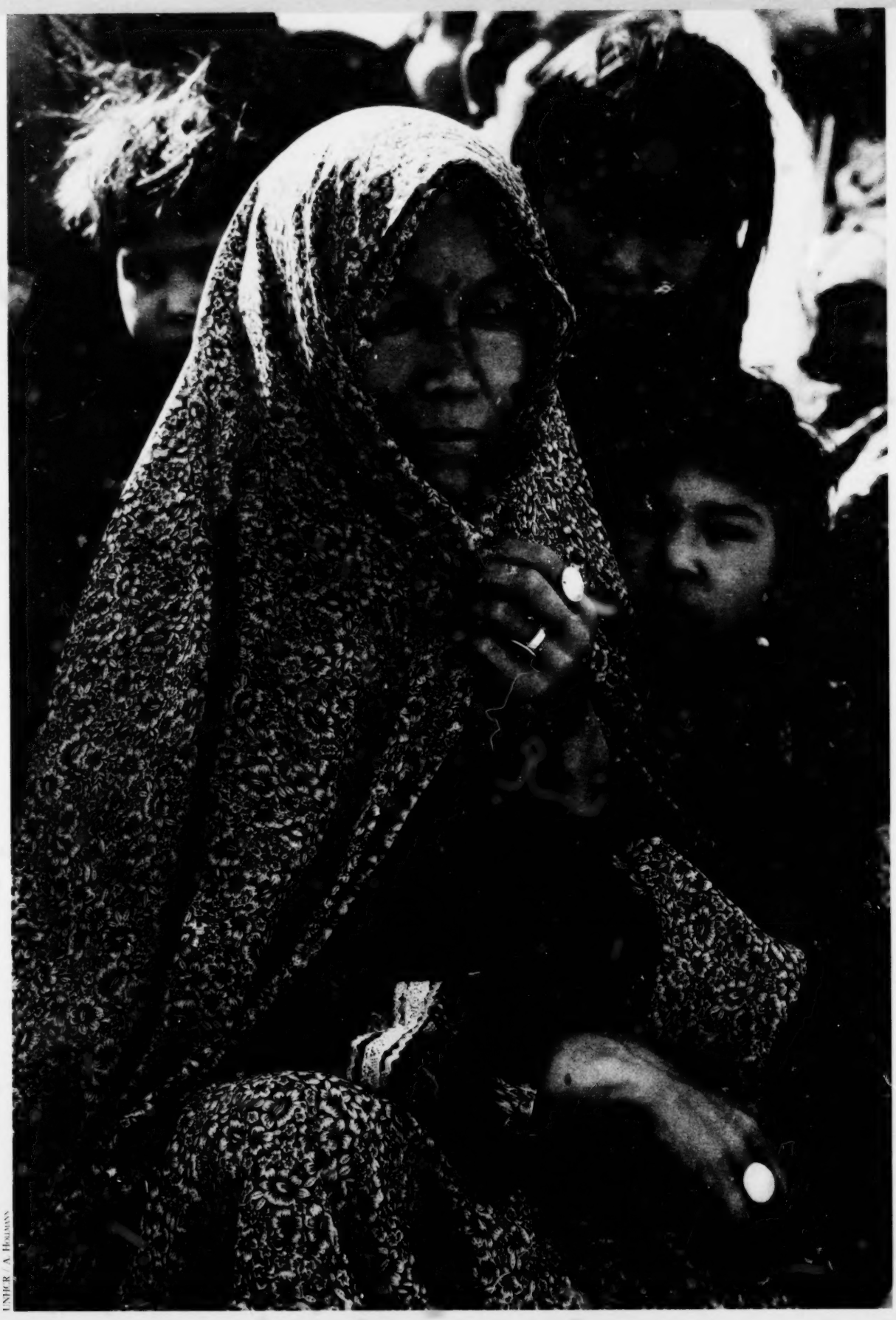
Hoinso Koffi Mawuli,
9, Togolese refugee in Ghana

"My father's name is Kuevi Simon. He is 54 years old. He's retired. My mum is called Amoussou Marie, 53 years old. She is a teacher. I have a brother and a sister.

"When the strike started, we were suddenly separated. I came to Keta. My mother and my sister went to Benin and my father stayed alone in Lomé with his dog. It is the first time it happens to us. Before, I would see and hear about separation of families and about conditions of life for refugees in the media. But I never thought it could happen to us one day in Togo.

"The day of our separation was so sad. I even cried. It was a Saturday in December when I arrived in Keta. I felt so lonely. I thought of my family a lot. On 25 December, I did not get a present from Santa Claus.

Kokoe Diane Kuevi,
12, Togolese refugee in Ghana



UNHCR / A. Hollmann

Help for single-parent refugee families

One night in 1986, a five-member Afghan refugee family living in Delhi, India, was turned upside down when the husband mysteriously failed to come home. He was never heard from again.

For his wife, Jahan Ara, life took a dramatic turn for the worse after her husband's disappearance. She was unable to go out to work because she couldn't leave her three children – whose ages ranged from two to six years old – by themselves. In addition, her husband had always been the family wage-earner and she had no outside work experience.

The children cried at night for their father, and Jahan felt alone and increasingly desperate. She had no relatives in India, and the only other Afghan refugees whom she knew in Delhi were all men. While several of them tried to help, she had to be careful about being seen with them, for the sake of her reputation. There were no Afghan women around to lend her support.

After six months, in accordance with customary practice at the time, the local UNHCR office reduced the amount of financial assistance it was providing to the family on the basis that there was now one less mouth to feed. This undoubtedly added to Jahan's burden.

In March 1987, Kiran Bahl, a UNHCR medical social worker in Delhi, was informed that Jahan Ara had been admitted to hospital the previous night with third degree burns, possibly self-inflicted. Her condition was critical. Bahl immediately rushed to the hospital, where the young woman pleaded with her not to allow her children to be put in an institution, but instead to send them to her elderly father back home in Afghanistan. By the following morning, Jahan Ara was dead.

> It is now regular practice, even during major refugee emergencies, to attempt to identify vulnerable families headed by women.

Today, as UNHCR and other agencies focus much more attention on the special needs of refugee women and children, a similar case would, hopefully, have a less disastrous outcome. It is now regular practice, even during major refugee emergencies, to attempt to identify vulnerable families headed by women as quickly as possible, both to protect them from possible harassment and to make sure they are receiving sufficient practical and emotional support.

The fate of Jahan Ara's three orphaned children was in the end not quite as bad as it might have been. UNHCR's offices inside Afghanistan were able to locate the children's grandfather. He was living, along with other *(continued on page 23)* ▶

An Afghan refugee woman and her children during voluntary repatriation from Iran.

Helping families help themselves

While the guns of war echoed in the distance, seeds were planted in the fields around the central Bosnian city of Zenica in the spring of 1993 to help feed victims of a cruel war.

Even in besieged Sarajevo, backyards, parks and balconies were turned – wherever possible – into family vegetable gardens under a food production program initiated by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. The program is being repeated again this year over a wide area of Bosnia-Herzegovina.

From the battlefields of the former Yugoslavia to urban centers in Brazil, UNHCR is putting in place projects to help families who are caught in conflicts or who have fled them.

"The programs are part of an effort to give dignity to these people by making them productive and self-supporting as soon as possible even in tough conditions," says Larbi Mebtouche, UNHCR's senior economist and planner.

In Bosnia-Herzegovina, some 70,000 family seed packages were distributed to communities hosting refugees and displaced people. Six months later, eight to 10 times the seed inputs in potatoes, onions and vegetables were harvested. In the Zenica region, for example, residents gathered 11,600 to 13,500 tons of food from the 1,350 tons of seed planted.

While food is urgently required in conflict zones, jobs and incomes are the compelling need of refugees in countries of asylum as well as of those who have recently returned to their often devastated homelands. UNHCR has been addressing all of these issues.

Mebtouche says local integration projects crafted to make refugee and returnee families in rural or urban settings become self-sufficient have been in place since the early 1980s, primarily in Africa. The success of each initiative depends on the ingenuity of the beneficiaries, the availability of funds and the ability of UNHCR to respond creatively in a given situation in addition to its usual care and maintenance programs.

Quick Impact Projects, or QIPs, were introduced in Nicaragua in 1991 to support people returning to their ravaged country after a decade of civil war. The short-term projects involved provision of water, health and sanitation facilities, repair of roads and bridges, and income-generation activities. The QIP initiative has been replicated elsewhere in Asia and Africa.

In Pakistan, UNHCR has an $86.6 million program to repair damage to the environment by the presence of one of the world's largest refugee groups. The program enlists Afghan refugees as laborers, providing them with regular income. Since it was started in 1984, thousands of acres of land in the Northwest Frontier Province and Baluchistan have been planted with eucaplyptus, acacia or casuarina trees. They are interspersed with indigenous "mazri" dwarf palm – a versatile cash crop with fronds that are used in making mats, baskets and caps. Needy families are paid to grow seedlings in aerated plastic bags in nurseries.

UNHCR has a similar environmental rehabilitation program on a smaller scale in Malawi, a tiny African country crammed with nearly a million Mozambican refugees.

Training programs are also available in Pakistan and Malawi to enable refugees to gain basic skills that can be applied in the rehabilitation and development of their war-devastated countries on their return.

In Pakistan, the International Rescue Committee, which receives funds from UNHCR, offers interest-free credit to vulnerable people like Sahib Jamala, an Afghan refugee widow with a family of six. Since she lost her husband four years ago, Sahib Jamala had become entirely dependent on her husband's relatives who also are refugees in Pakistan. Thanks to the IRC credit, she managed to buy a goat to start a small breeding business and supplies her family and relatives with milk.

In Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Zaire, Ghana, Kenya, Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire, UNHCR funded poultry farms, tailoring shops, palm-kernel entrepreneurs and sugarcane traders in an effort to make refugee families self-sufficient. In Brazil's highly urbanized cities of Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo, some 1,400 asylum seekers, mainly from Angola, are beneficiaries of UNHCR's training and job placement schemes.

Tens of thousands of people have gained from UNHCR's self-sufficiency programs, and all have something in common, says Mebtouche: hard work and a desire to help their families even under the most difficult of conditions.

Fernando Del Mundo

Single-parent families

▶ *(from page 21)* members of his family (including several women), in an area that was free of fighting. As he was more than happy to take on the responsibility of bringing up his orphaned grandchildren – and was in a position to do so – UNHCR flew them to Mazar-i-Sharif in northern Afghanistan, where, in a very emotional scene, they were formally handed into his care.

Before the tragic chain of events sparked off by the sudden disappearance of Jahan Ara's husband, her family had been in a relatively fortunate position compared to many other refugee families (although the lack of any members of her extended family played a major role in what was to follow). A large number of refugee families lose one or several members before or during their flight. With 80 percent of all refugees either women or children, the number of refugee households headed by females is huge.

Refugee mothers, especially those with small children, face a wide range of difficulties if they are without husbands or other adult male relatives. Trying to care for small children single-handed, with little or no income, in a strange country that often has a radically different culture and language, while at the same time coping with personal grief and anxiety can make day-to-day problems seem totally overwhelming.

Ironically, life for a single woman with children can be easier in a refugee camp than it is in a city, where other refugees are less easily accessible. "Urban refugees sometimes do not even know where other people from their country are living in the same city," said Marie Lobo, UNHCR's senior social services officer in Geneva. "Urban refugees lack the support of friends, family and community. Single women with children, in particular, miss the help and comfort provided by other women." Moreover, it can be extremely difficult for UNHCR and other relief agencies to identify those who are most in need in cities.

UNHCR - L. Taylor

Somali refugee women at a knitting class in Egypt. Community centers offering such activities enable refugees to meet others who share similar problems.

Nowadays, UNHCR is trying to assist single mothers in more constructive ways than was sometimes the case in the past. Community workers and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), experienced at working in a particular city, are often used to help identify at-risk families, such as Jahan Ara's, that need special assistance and information to help them start rebuilding their lives.

One example of UNHCR efforts to identify those with special needs is the stand-by emergency arrangements with Radda Barnen, a Swedish NGO. During the early stages of a refugee emergency, trained community workers from Radda Barnen are sent to the scene with the specific objective of identifying at-risk populations and setting up initial arrangements designed to prevent problems that, if left unchecked early on, might easily spread out of control. One of the first things these community workers look into is the needs of mothers who have no spouse or relatives to support them. They also attempt to identify skilled people among the refugees – doctors, nurses, technicians – who can be immediately employed to good effect, and to develop community support systems to help identify and advise those in need, such as single-parent families.

While significant advances have been made in the management of emergencies over the past few years, urban refugees still pose a major challenge. In Moscow, for example, there are refugees from at least nineteen different countries scattered around the city. Many of them do not speak Russian. Among them are many single mothers, living far from their homes and totally without support.

"There is general poverty on the streets – the women, children and elderly have started to beg. Some people do not have enough ▶

money for a whole loaf of bread and have to buy half or quarter loaves," said Yvette Stevens, chief of UNHCR's Program and Technical Support Section, who recently returned from Russia. "Refugees are among the worst affected, and some are forced to live in public places, such as railway stations."

One way to alleviate the problems facing urban refugees, especially female-headed families, is to establish a community center. Plans are being drawn up for one in Moscow. "A community center, ideally one which is accessible to all refugees, can help people find support, information, and most importantly, meaningful friends," said Stevens. In Moscow, for example, language classes in Russian, a library, a soup kitchen, child care, and primary health care could all be provided under one roof. Refugees would at last have somewhere to go, somewhere to meet people with whom they have something in common.

Community centers of this type have a proven track record, and have been growing more and more popular since they started being developed in the early 1980s. There are now dozens scattered in major cities around the world. Usually run by NGOs with the assistance of UNHCR, they provide a much-needed lifeline for urban refugees, and are particularly helpful to single women with children. The mutual support which invariably springs from meeting others gives people hope. More importantly, by taking it in turns to be responsible for child care, all the women are given the opportunity to undertake activities that are very difficult, if not impossible, to do while constantly looking after small children.

Refugees of both sexes can trade their skills to help each other. For example, as there are often teachers among refugees, the children can start receiving education at very little cost, in much the same way as education is set up in refugee camps. A center makes learning possible not only for the children but also for adults, who can learn useful skills from each other, which they would be unable to do out on the street. The older women teach inexperienced younger women how to cope with pregnancy and looking after young children. They may also teach them income-generating skills such as knitting or embroidery, and help each other to find work.

One of the biggest aids to single mothers is to provide them with a source of income – either through job placement or home-based activities which enable them to earn some money.

One of the biggest aids to single mothers is to provide them with a source of income – either through job placement or home-based activities which enable them to earn some money. In Iran, UNHCR provided groups of Afghan women with a one-time supply of thread to weave traditional carpets – traditional carpets for the region, but beautiful and highly valued elsewhere. "The women would weave nearly every day – at home or in a group. After selling a carpet, they used part of their share of the earnings to buy necessary items – usually food, clothes, and shoes," said Omar Bakhet, UNHCR's former representative in Iran. "The rest of the money was spent on new cloth and threads with which to weave the next carpet and so perpetuate the source of income."

In Hungary, refugee women from former Yugoslavia unraveled old sweaters and knitted new ones, as well as blankets and shawls to keep themselves warm, or to sell in the market.

One problem that persists is the question of financial assistance – an issue UNHCR has yet to come fully to terms with. UNHCR only provides a small financial grant for a short time to families in need. Moreover, this money is given out on a sliding scale, based on family size. In the case of Jahan Ara, the disappearance of her husband led to a cut in the amount of assistance, when if anything her needs became greater. How can financial assistance be provided in a more sensitive, more carefully targeted way? Can extra funds be raised to ensure that truly needy families do not slip through the safety net? Are donors fully aware of the importance of flexible financial assistance and income-generating projects? Such questions still need to be addressed both within UNHCR and by other agencies and the donor community. At the moment, these types of non-emergency assistance are the first to be cut back when programs are squeezed by lack of funding.

The number of problems that face a refugee mother without a husband to help her support the family is daunting. UNHCR is striving to do more to meet the special needs of single women and their families. Understanding those needs, and instilling a fierce commitment to provide a viable home environment for such women and their children, whether that home is a tent or some small corner of a strange and bewildering city, are the first steps in providing assistance in a dignified and appropriate way. Since Jahan Ara's death in 1987, there has been much progress. But a great deal remains to be done.

Robin Ellis

Life's biggest lemon

In the American South, where my Vietnamese family made our second home, there is a saying: "If life throws you a lemon, make lemonade." That lemon, for us, is our refugee experience. And we have made the largest glass of lemonade from it. July 1981. My father completed his sixth visit to the local government's office. Since his release from the concentration camp, he had gone there monthly to inform the Vietnamese authorities about the details of his life. That weekend, my family packed a change of clothes for what I was told would be "a long journey."

A nine-day voyage on a wooden boat brought us to Malaysia. My family waited at the camp for a year before we were flown to the United States. Like many refugees, we restarted life in America with several disadvantages. We had no relatives here. Everything that was familiar to us was left behind in Viet Nam. Our English was not good enough to tell people at the local Thrift Store that we needed shoes, and the prospect for employment was not at all certain.

After the refugee experience, the task of recreating meaning and purpose in life was the greatest challenge and perhaps most valuable achievement for my family. During those years, waking up and facing life each day were acts of courage for my parents. Life was not prefabricated. One had the option of hiding inside the apartment and drowning under the demands of the new environment. The alternative was to stand up and face life with the ferocity of a hungry canine when it sees its first prey. How much strength and courage my parents have had in order to continue life under such circumstances!

American society is completely foreign to a refugee. It differs from his native culture in language, customs and attitudes. For a person without the support of a family, life can be intolerable. Fortunately, my family has been the source of comfort and protection for all of us ever since we escaped Viet Nam. My parents have always absorbed the hardest financial and emotional shocks. For many summers, my father would take on a second job to earn extra money so that his children could attend camps, take music lessons or join the Little League baseball teams. We never had to interrupt our education to work and support the family. My parents took this burden upon themselves.

In addition, they have acted as a repository of Vietnamese culture for us. As a young refugee looks around, he sees the ubiquitous American culture, but often his own culture is rapidly disappearing. My siblings and I in return have served as our parents' liaison to the larger society. It is through us that they reached out and made friends with other Americans. Twelve years have passed since my family first became refugees. Today, we no longer have to lift crates at warehouses on night shift. There is no more washing dishes or waiting tables at ethnic restaurants. Instead of survival strategies, we now discuss Christian ethics and social issues at our dinner table. Many of my parents' dreams have been fulfilled.

Through the church and work places, my parents have found ways to become contributing members to the American society that embraced them. My father founded a Boy Scouts of America unit for Vietnamese youths in our city. He also teaches Bible classes in the church. My mother, likewise, is socially engaged in her work to assist immigrant students from Mexico, Viet Nam, Somalia, Haiti and Bosnia. She also worked at World Relief to help refugees adjust to their new lives in the United States.

As for my siblings, when asked, "How have your refugee experiences affected your outlook on life and your future aspirations?" my 19-year-old sister thoughtfully responded: "It made me more sympathetic to the needs of people who have difficulties defining their places in society." She taught summer programs to introduce art into the lives of Vietnamese and African American youths. She presently studies English at Amherst College and plans to become a physician specializing in tropical medicine.

My brother is 20 years old and studies biology at Presbyterian College. He finds that our family's refugee experience has deepened his understanding of human suffering. "A homeless man in the street of Boston lacks not only money," he told me. "You often see people giving spare change to these poor folks, but they are afraid to stop and talk." Having once been a refugee, he knows what it is like in the periphery of human society. "This homeless man also needs human companionship, so I stop and talk to him." My brother has also been involved with former President Jimmy Carter's project to build homes for low-income families in urban areas. He hopes to become a missionary doctor.

I, too, realize that the refugee experience has carved deep into my physical and emotional being. To recapitulate, it is the biggest lemon that life has ever thrown me, but I have also made the largest lemonade for myself. Hardships give birth to endurance, and suffering yields greater compassion. Every time I think that any task I have here at Harvard is unmanageable, I am reminded that nothing is as difficult as picking up the pieces of one's life.

Like my father, I see that the refugee experience is only temporary. For our family it lasted a year, but its impact is felt for a lifetime.

Nguyen-Vu Nguyen
Harvard University

Health care and the refugee family

Women and children constitute more than three quarters of the refugee population. Having to maintain the household and look after the well-being of the children, women tend to bear a disproportionate amount of the suffering and hardship that affect families in exile. Not only do women carry the emotional and physical burden of caring for the whole family under difficult conditions, but in the process they are more exposed to violence and often become victims themselves of inadequate diets and infectious diseases.

Over the years, UNHCR has realized that the best way to help the family as a whole is by helping women, who are almost invariably the backbone of the family, the firm support on which husbands and children rely.

"It is the policy of UNHCR to make special efforts to meet the needs of women because their good health is crucial to the unity and strength of the refugee family," said Serge Malé, UNHCR's senior epidemiologist.

Mother and Child Health Care (MCH) programs were organized over the past several years in an attempt to reduce infant and maternal mortality rates. The MCH programs have focused on the health aspects of pregnant and lactating mothers and children, and certainly achieved some success. But it is now generally recognized that their scope has to be expanded.

"The trouble with MCH programs is that they restrict women to the role of mother," Malé said. "This is very reductive. What about young girls who may – or may not – one day become mothers? What about women who are past child-bearing age, who in many societies have enormous influence over younger women? Ignore them and you risk diluting the effectiveness of health care and health education programs."

Programs targeted not only at adult women but also at teenage girls and elderly women stand a better chance of preventing the spread of a variety of deadly illnesses such as neonatal tetanus, an acute disease that usually occurs through infection caused by cutting the umbilical cord with non-sterile instruments. In 1988, the mortality rate from neonatal tetanus ranged from 100 to 150 per 1,000 live births among refugees in rural areas of eastern Iran. This is an extremely high figure and prompted an accelerated effort to reduce the rate through training of female health workers and traditional birth attendants. At the same time, a massive immunization program was begun. All of these efforts yielded dramatic results.

It is also important to include older women in health care programs because in many traditional societies they wield the influence and power to change old ways of thinking and to guide the younger women.

UNHCR has slowly been developing greater respect for local customs, mainly through a process of trial and error. It is now generally recognized that cultural sensitivity can be the key to an efficient program. Cultural beliefs and traditions must be respected, but people must also understand that they can be harmful. Ritual genital mutilation, unsafe child delivery methods, a tradition of fasting for days after birth and not breastfeeding a newborn during the first 48 hours are all examples of practices that can cause major health problems.

In many societies, women are reluctant to consult male doctors

One of the most fundamental cultural issues in many countries concerns the question of gender. In many societies, women are reluctant to consult male doctors. The presence of female health staff can be absolutely essential to the success of a health program, as was clearly demonstrated in Bangladesh in 1992 when refugee women from neighboring Myanmar were discovered to be suffering a higher mortality and morbidity rate than males. The main problem? There were no female health workers available.

Simple factors, such as too few or badly positioned health centers can have a devastating effect on families. If a mother has seven children and one falls sick, is she going to walk 5 km to get the sick child to a clinic, and then sit there with it for 24 hours, leaving the other six children on their own, with no one to fetch and cook their food? In such situations, mothers will often feel that the risk of abandoning six children is simply too great, and as a result the sick child may die.

"It is extremely important to take health care to the refugees – to have an outreach program," said Mohamed Warsame Dualeh, UNHCR's senior public health officer. "It has to be easily accessible."

Dualeh noted that in 1988, in Hartisheik, Ethiopia, the mortality

rate for children under five years of age was extremely high – 152 deaths per 1,000 people. The rate was caused by several factors, including inadequate food rations, water and sanitation, and the poor design and layout of the camp itself which made it difficult for people to obtain health care. As a result, health care services were decentralized and an outreach program was begun. Women were encouraged to bring their children to feeding centers early enough, and refugees were trained as health workers and birth attendants. Improving access allowed mothers to take care of all pressing family needs, ranging from gathering firewood to seeking medical help for the children.

A fundamental characteristic of health care is that it is an essential service but not sufficient on its own. There is a clear need, particularly in emergency situations, for better coordination, in particular closer linkage with other vital sectors such as water, sanitation and food provision. The malnutrition and terrible sanitation conditions suffered by Burundi refugees in Rwanda, Tanzania and Zaire in the autumn of 1993 helped make them extremely vulnerable to diseases such as dysentery, anemia and related illnesses. The result was a catastrophic average mortality rate of 8.6 per 10,000 per day (4.3 times the acceptable rate) among Burundi refugee children. For families who have already experienced the horrors of massacres, ethnic cleansing and wholesale destruction of their villages and livelihoods the emotional impact of the additional loss of children through malnutrition and disease in refugee camps can be devastating.

In a worst-case scenario, women lack an adequate diet and become susceptible to anemia, which makes them more prone to other illnesses. Because they are sick, they are unable to take proper care of themselves and their children, who themselves then become malnourished and ill. Because of the poor diet, women also give birth to premature or underweight babies who have a low chance of survival. Moreover, these new mothers lack the additional energy and protein required by lactating women. In most UNHCR refugee programs, pregnant and lactating women receive extra food.

The question of mental health is both extremely relevant to refugees and particularly hard to deal with satisfactorily. A whole set of health problems are simply manifestations of emotional disturbances. "Vulnerable groups" such as single parents, unaccompanied minors and physically or mentally handicapped all have to deal with a second layer of social disadvantages on top of the whole range of difficulties brought about by the simple fact of being a refugee. Not surprisingly, such situations often lead to psychological traumas which have physical repercussions, often disastrous to the family as a whole.

If UNHCR's mandate is to save lives, the pivotal role of the woman is obvious. Efforts to meet the needs of refugee women – and through them their families – will surely help UNHCR to fulfill its mandate. ■

An Afghan refugee mother and her daughter visit a doctor in Pakistan.

UNHCR / H.J. Davis

Medicine or Politics?

Birth spacing and health care for refugee women

Refugee women and children are at once war's most visible and its most neglected victims. While they provide the grimly poignant photographs that illustrate our daily news, their special needs go largely unstudied and unmet. Since the Bosnian conflict, with its horrifying accompaniment of widespread rape, the international community has awakened to the need for women's trauma counseling and social support services in the aftermath of civil strife.

But women displaced by war have other special needs as well, needs less newsworthy than trauma counseling, but just as specific to their lives. Chief among these is the need for family planning, prenatal and postnatal care, and other reproductive health services.

For some refugees, the lack of these services is a continuation of the conditions that existed before they were driven from their homes. For others, who were once able to take these services for granted, their absence merely adds to the list of their difficulties. But for all of them, the lack of these services poses a significant health risk.

Without pre- and post-natal health care, mortality rates for women and children are high. Without birth spacing services, refugee and displaced women are unable to avoid frequent, high-risk pregnancies in situations already adverse because of dislocation, physical danger, and minimal food, shelter, and sanitation.

In situations like Bosnia, where family planning was once commonplace, the sudden absence of services has caused the abortion rate to skyrocket. The lack of certain forms of contraceptives and accompanying information about AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases leaves women more vulnerable to infection.

Reproductive health care is urgently needed and wanted in refugee settings around the world. Hardly any humanitarian relief agencies are providing it. The reasons range from a "war/disaster mentality" that does not see the issue as a priority, to the trickiness of meshing reproductive health programs with values and traditions of the population involved, to the strictly practical problems of cost and logistics. The result is a situation in which, despite a dawning awareness of the issue by relief officials, too little is known and too little is done.

To address this problem, the New York-based Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children has launched an ambitious research project and has begun to map women's reproductive health needs in refugee and displaced populations around the world. Under a grant from the Mellon Foundation, members of the commission, and leading experts in women's health have begun a series of site visits to determine what kinds of reproductive health services women want and need, how successful the few existing programs are, how much new programs would cost, and what special logistical problems would be involved.

In the fall of 1993, a Women's Commission group visited refugee settings in Rwanda, Kenya, Côte d'Ivoire, Pakistan, Bosnia, and Croatia. Early this year, they will make trips to Thailand, Cambodia, Belize, and Hong Kong. Among the refugees interviewed by the end of the project will be women from Somalia, Liberia, Afghanistan, Myanmar, Laos, Viet Nam, Nicaragua, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia.

A final report on the team's findings will be presented at the United Nations World Conference on Population in Cairo in September. This spring, members of the team will discuss their work at the International Health Conference in Virginia. This is only the first step in launching a public information and advocacy program on behalf of the refugee women of reproductive age. The magnitude of their needs means that it is vital for us to get the information out to policy makers, donors and agencies to help ensure that needed services are available to all refugee and displaced women who request them. When they are battling hunger, cold, illness, and the loss of homes and loved ones, they should not also be without the kind of specific care they require as women.

Ann Craig
Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children
New York

UNHCR / B. Press

Burundi refugees in Rwanda. Many African refugees are from agricultural societies and must establish their new households in a totally alien environment.

African refugee families

The huge number of refugees in Africa has had a devastating effect on the economic and social structure of the continent, where an estimated 6 million people are currently assisted by UNHCR. In addition to these 6 million refugees, there are an estimated 12 million displaced people.

At the macro level, this large refugee and displaced population has had severe consequences on the productive growth of African economies. At the more micro level, the refugee crisis has had a negative impact on African communities and families.

"Family" has a wide range of definitions cross-culturally. This is particularly true in Africa, where kinship systems and residence and marriage patterns create family shapes, values, and obligations that vary among regions and between ethnic groups.

Across cultures, families link households and communities, and play a vital role in the development process in several ways, including:

- As a productive and economic unit;
- In the provision of social security for vulnerable groups through kinship ties;
- Through formal and informal education, and preservation of cultural identity.

These family functions have been disturbed in Africa, where civil strife and natural disasters have caused involuntary migration and the creation of large populations of refugees.

Refugees are often perceived as dependent individuals who live in large camps and receive food and other aid irrespective of their cultural origins. Without a country of their own, they are living in an artificial setting, a socio-cultural void. But it is important to understand refugees according to their own unique socio-cultural background, and that their needs will vary according to traditions. Understanding the family kinship patterns and household structures of refugee populations, and developing community-based assistance efforts that attempt to work within the boundaries of family and societal traditions help refugees to adapt more easily to their sudden transfer to an alien environment.

Africa is predominantly an agrarian society, and refugees come largely from rural areas. In Ethiopia for example, more than 90 percent of the population depends on agriculture for subsistence, and in Uganda more than 85 percent of the people live in rural areas. These rural households are usually marked by a socio-economic division of labor, with all household members, male and female, young and old, given specific roles and functions. These include such tasks as cultivating, harvesting, processing, storing and marketing agricultural produce.

But in many parts of Africa, land scarcity and population growth have altered the traditional agrarian economy and caused rural out-migration as people go in search of wage labor to supplement the family income. This changing pattern in the African rural household economy reveals a gradual evolution of family roles in response to changing economic needs.

By contrast, the forced migration of refugees in response to political and environmental disasters has ▶

thrust more sudden changes on the rural economy, and the family. There is no opportunity for gradual adaptations to develop in the refugee crisis. Entire communities are abandoned and agricultural production stops completely. The families who survive the crises of war, famine and forced dislocation and become members of the refugee community must establish their new households in an alien setting, without the comfort and resources of the rural economy they have left behind.

While refugee communities quickly develop their own economies, many of the traditional economic roles of the refugee population are abandoned due to the limitations of the settlement or camp setting. For example, nomadic and pastoral people are typically forced to abandon livestock raising because they no longer have access to range land. For many refugee families, this causes a cultural identity crisis, as well as an economic hardship.

In flight, households and family members are often separated. Women are forced to flee without male family members who are left behind to fight. In northern Uganda, for example, Sudanese women refugees are left alone to manage households without their husbands. Previously dependent on farming in Sudan, these women are left alone with no alternative sources of support.

Men's and women's roles, developed over time to suit the environment and the economy where they evolved, are so disrupted that the family may become dysfunctional. Decision-making authority given to women in agrarian economies – such as control of certain crops and resources – may no longer exist in the new refugee environment.

Marriage is an integral part of family formation. The initiation of marriage assumes various forms in different African cultures, including pre-nuptial economic arrangements in many societies. These economic transactions create essential bonds of kinship and help to ensure the endurance of family unions formed through the alliance of marriage. In the refugee setting, these traditional arrangements are often not possible.

Research among refugee communities in Ethiopia, for example, has revealed problems among both Sudanese and Somali populations because of the breakdown of traditional marriage arrangements. When Nuor and Dinka Sudanese men were unable to afford cattle for the traditional payment to the bride's family, they began to abduct their brides illegally. This "kidnapping" among Sudanese refugees in Ethiopia has resulted in conflict among families and a disruption of the refugee community.

This example illustrates the need for social services among refugee populations. In this particular case, social workers were able to help open a dialogue between all sides that led to a compromise in meeting traditional marriage obligations in the alien environment of a refugee camp. Similar problems have also occurred among Somali refugees. Because the normal payments for a bride cannot be secured by Somali refugee men prior to marriage, the marriage itself is seen as less of a commitment and the divorce rate has climbed accordingly.

Somali women refugees note that the high rate of abandonment can also be attributed to the fact that men no longer have a viable economic role to play in the refugee setting. As a result, many men leave in search of jobs in other countries, leaving their families behind. This is especially true in many first-asylum countries in Africa which are unable to provide enough work for their own citizens, let alone thousands of refugees.

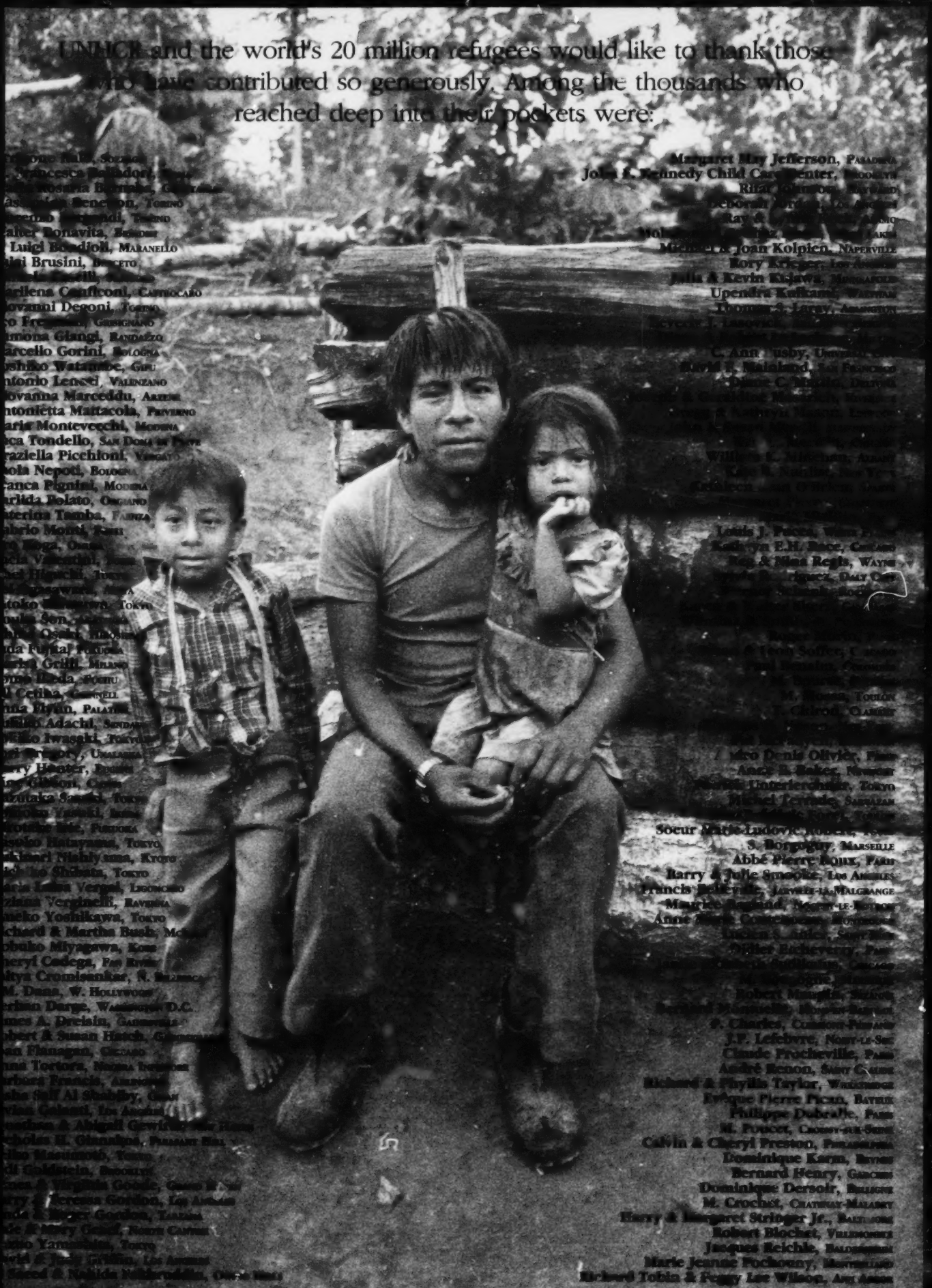
Although the provision of basic education to refugee children is one of the primary goals of UNHCR assistance, it cannot replace the non-formal training provided by the family. In Africa, the family is primarily responsible for teaching children cultural and religious values, as well as the skills necessary to become self-supporting adults. This includes farming and herding, as well as the processing and trading of agricultural products. Children who are born and brought up as refugees are often deprived of the opportunity to learn these skills.

Refugee children and their families are also affected by their exposure to different education systems and languages in their host country. Some Sudanese refugee children who were separated and then reunited with their families were unable to communicate with their parents. Re-integration within their own culture and society also becomes more complex. Social centers offering cultural activities are encouraged by UNHCR to help young refugees learn about their own traditions, languages and customs.

The introduction to foreign education systems also creates gender and culture conflicts. Girls who attended sex segregated schools in their own country may be thrust into integrated systems, which are unacceptable to their parents. For some parents, no education for girls is better than the "danger" posed by educating boys and girls together.

SARAH NORTON-STAAL

> When refugee men couldn't afford cattle for the traditional payment to the bride's family, they began abducting their brides.



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HOW DOES IT FEEL?

Imagine this.

You've lived all your life at peace. Home, family, friends, all normal. Then, without warning, your whole world changes.

Overnight, lifelong neighbours become lifelong enemies. Tanks prowl the streets and buses burn. Mortar shells shatter the mosques. Rockets silence the church bells.

Suddenly everything you've known and owned and loved has gone and, if you're lucky enough to survive, you find yourself alone and bewildered in a foreign land. You are a refugee.

How does it feel?

The fact is, refugees are just like you and me, except that they have nothing. And that's exactly what they'll always have unless we help.

UNHCR

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

We're not asking for money (though every contribution helps), but only this:

When you do meet a refugee, imagine for a moment what it must be like, and then show her your smile. Instead of your back.

It may not seem much. But to a refugee it can mean everything.

UNHCR is a strictly humanitarian organization funded only by voluntary contributions. Currently it is responsible for more than 20 million refugees around the world.

Models courtesy of the Lego Group.

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